



A way out of the morass

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The U.S.'s plan to pull out of Afghanistan is an appropriate time to re-examine the idea of enabling its neutrality

Another approach to Afghanistan

- The only way out of the morass in Afghanistan would be to re-place Afghanistan in its traditional mode of neutrality.
- For that, two things were essential.
- The Afghans themselves must declare unequivocally that they would follow strict neutrality in their relations with external powers, and the outside powers must commit themselves to respect Afghanistan's neutrality.
- In other words, external powers must subscribe to a multilateral declaration not to interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan together with an obligation on Afghanistan not to seek outside intervention in its internal situation.
- It was further put forward the idea that the agreement on the Neutrality of Laos, concluded in 1962, could provide a model for the neutralisation of Afghanistan.
- The present might be an appropriate time to revisit that proposal.
- U.S. President Donald Trump has announced his decision to reduce American troop strength in Afghanistan, 14,000 at present, by half.
- This development has energised the principal stakeholders in Afghanistan to make calculated efforts to place themselves in as favourable a position as possible in an Afghanistan post-American withdrawal.
- India should also be thinking of what steps it should take to protect its interests in that situation.

Engage with the Taliban

- One thing that should already have been done and must be done is to

engage in dialogue with the Taliban.

- There is no doubt that the Taliban will be a major player in the politics of Afghanistan in the coming months and years.
- In any future scenario, the Taliban are guaranteed to play an important, perhaps even a decisive role in the governing structures of the country.
- New Delhi has so far refrained from establishing formal contacts with the Taliban out of sensitivity for the Kabul government not wanting to talk directly to the Taliban as long as the Taliban refuse to acknowledge its legitimacy.
- However, India must look after its own interests.
- After all, the Americans have not always been sensitive to our concerns, in Afghanistan or elsewhere and Mr. Trump has publicly shown unawareness of our substantial development assistance to it.

A regional compact

- The international community ought to, at the same time, think of how to establish a mechanism which might offer a reasonable opportunity to the Afghan people to live in peace, free from external interference.
- And perhaps the only way in which this could be done is to promote a regional compact among all the neighbouring countries as well as relevant external powers, and with the endorsement of the UN Security Council, to commit themselves not to interfere in Afghanistan's internal affairs.
- The most important country in this regard is Pakistan.
- Pakistan should have no objection to formally agreeing to Afghanistan's neutrality.
- There is the most relevant precedent of the Bilateral Agreement on the Principles of Mutual Relations, in particular on Non-interference and Non-intervention, signed in Geneva in 1988 between Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- The Bonn Agreement of 2001, which made Hamid Karzai the interim chief of Afghan government, contains a request to the United Nations and the international community to 'guarantee' non-interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, a request not acted upon so far.

Some concerns

- A regional pact on non-interference and non-intervention ought to be welcomed by all the regional states.
- Russia has reason to worry about a lack of stability in Afghanistan

because of its concerns regarding a spread of radicalism as well as the drug menace.

- China has even stronger concerns, given the situation in its western-most region.
- The U.S. might have apprehensions about China entrenching itself in strategically important Afghanistan, but there is little it can do about it; a regional agreement on non-interference might give the U.S. at least some comfort.
- It is early days to conclude whether the situation in Afghanistan has entered its end game.

The Hindu

